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Moving rapidly toward first-strike capacity

U.S. not losing arms race

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Second of two articles

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The majority within the U.S. ruling circles that is demanding an all-out "rearmament program" bases its case on two main premises: Moscow now spends up to 50% more on war preparations than does Washington, and the USSR has attained at least "rough equivalence" with U.S. nuclear might.

In assessing the first of these claims last week (Guardian Sept. 17), it was shown that the CIA is the sole source of estimates which place the Kremlin's defense spending at a sum far exceeding the Pentagon's. These computations are unconfirmed by less biased analysts and are strongly challenged by independent specialists familiar with CIA methodology. It was also demonstrated that suddenly inflated figures for the Soviet defense effort coincided with U.S. attempts to dispel the "Vietnam syndrome" and to provide a rationale for a military spending spree that began in 1976.

Most reputable observers, meanwhile, agree that the Soviet Union has indeed been engaged in a significant build-up over the past decade. These nongovernmental sources simultaneously point out, however, that the Soviet initiative was launched from a much lower base point and has proceeded at a pace considerably less precipitous than is depicted by U.S. hawks.

But what about the U.S.-USSR nuclear balance? Isn't there some merit to the widely held assumption that it has evened out in recent years and has perhaps even begun to tip in favor of the USSR? Unlike CIA estimates of Soviet defense budgets, claims of an apparent advantage for Moscow in nuclear weaponry do seem verifiable.

When the CIA says that the Soviets are allocating $165 billion a year to their military machine, skeptics are generally able to dispute only the agency's formulas, not its data base, since published USSR defense budgets are universally acknowledged to be gross underrepresentations of actual outlays. For the Soviet nuclear arsenal, no comparable problem exists. During 10 years of negotiations over the two strategic arms limitation treaties (SALT 1 and 2), both sides gave what must be assumed are accurate tabulations of their respective weapons systems.

This cataloging—readily verifiable by sophsiticated reconnaisance—is interpreted by many U.S. politicians, media commentators and right-wing academics as indicating "a clear and present danger" of Soviet nuclear superiority. So broad and firmly estalished is this consensus that it is not really challenged even by some advocates of arms control. Many forces favoring ratification of SALT 2, including the Carter administration, often argued that the ostensible Soviet nuclear momentum could best be checked by accepting "the best possible agreement."

Further to the right, in the think tanks inhabited by the professional militarists and hard-line neoconservatives, the comparison of atomic armaments and delivery systems is presented as proof of imminent Soviet agression and subsequent victory. When the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan is added to the brew, the superhawks go completely hysterical.

MEDIA HYSTERIA

The corporate press has outdone itself in tilting public perception toward the view of Soviet superiority. A week does not pass without the appearance in some mass-circulation, "prestige" publication of a table showing the Soviet lead in missile sizes and numbers. This alarming contrast in the superpowers' strategic nuclear triad—ground-launched intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs); submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs); and piloted bombers—is usually accompanied by the notation that the USSR will soon be able to destroy most U.S. ground-based missiles in their silos.

In the ICBM column—invariably listed first—the much bigger Soviet rockets number 1398, while the U.S. total is listed at 1054. Under the SLBM heading, the U.S. has 41 submarines carrying 656 missiles—a poor second to the Soviets with their 62 submarines and 950 SLBMs. Only for the "air leg" of the triad does the U.S. show a distinct advantage with 348 B-52s to the USSR's 140 "Bear" and "Bison" bombers.

The reader is thus left with the implication that the U.S. lags dangerously in both ground- and sea-launched missiles and manages to outdo the Soviets only in "old-fashioned" subsonic bombers. And as if this situation weren't bad enough, the charts and tables also explain that the huge and powerful Soviet ICBMs are much newer than the "aging" U.S. fleet of Minuteman and Titan missiles.

Other computations and categories are equally instructive, however, and these are often relegated to footnote status or are interspersed among long, technical descriptions that are laden with confusing acronyms and technocratic jargon. But in order to gain a valid comparison and a nonsuperficial understanding of U.S.-USSR nuclear capabilities, it is necessary to review these additional statistics.

Perhaps the most telling is the fact that the U.S. now has 10,000 strategic nuclear warheads (capable of hitting the USSR) deployed in its triad, while the Soviet Union possesses about 6000 of these strategic atomic weapons. In five years, before the U.S. has made its Missile-Experimental (MX) and Trident-2 systems fully operational, its arsenal will total 14,000 strategic warheads. Not included in any of these tallies are the 22,000 tactical nuclear weapons deployed by the U.S. in Western Europe, many of which can reach targets in the Soviet Union west of the Ural Mountains. By definition, none of the USSR's tactical nukes can threaten the US.

The almost 2-1 differential in strategic nuclear warheads results from the U.S. lead in multiple individually-targeted reentry vehicles (MIRVs). Because of this technology, which the U.S. developed five years before the USSR, nearly all U.S. SLBMs, most ICBMs and the B-52s carry multiple warheads. Due to MIRVs, a single U.S. submarine carries atomic weapons which can hit 160 different targets in the USSR.

When assessing relative nuclear strength, it is also important to gauge the significance assigned to each leg of the triad. With the development of pinpoint MIRVs and maneuverable reentry vehicles (MARVs) by both sides, the ground-based missiles of the U.S. and the Soviet Union are becoming increasingly vulnerable to a preemptive first-strike. Only 21% of the 10,000 strategic nuclear warheads in the U.S. arsenal are affixed to these endangered ICBMs. Almost four-fifths—79%—of the Soviets' 6000 strategic nukes are mounted atop their ground-based missiles.

More than half the U.S. strategic atomic arsenal—45%—is assigned to submarines, compared to 21% of the Soviet stockpile which is so deployed. Submarine-based missiles are described by no less an authority than Defense Secretary Harold Brown as "essentially invulnerable" to any preemptive strike. One-quarter of U.S. strategic nuclear weapons are loaded on the 349 B-52s which are also equipped with special missiles that can hit targets more than 100 miles from the bomber's line of flight. The Soviet Union places only a very few atomic weapons on its bombers.

Readiness for actual use must also be considered in any examination of the triads. The U.S. nuclear force is constantly on the verge of being deployed, with 48% of its strategic warheads (4650 bombs) on "alert" status. Only 3% of the USSR's arsenal (160 warheads) is ready to go at any given time. In the event of any surprise attack, it is therefore the U.S. which will be able to move very rapidly from "normal" conditions to full wartime footing.

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